

## Familiar face makes role her own

### By winning Democratic primary, Rawlings-Blake sets out to shape office

By Jean Marbella  
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She has been Baltimore's mayor for nearly 20 months already, thrust into office to become a familiar if often unreadable face at the helm of a city beset by crime, budgetary woes and even Mother Nature.

But with her victory in the Democratic primary Tuesday — long considered the de-facto election in a heavily Democratic city — political veterans say Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake has won the time and latitude to move from what has often been a response mode to one in which she shapes the office, its agenda and her own leadership style.

Kweisi Mfume, the former congressman who has known Rawlings-Blake since her youth, said Rawlings-Blake is no longer in an "inherited position" and now can seize her opportunity to put her stamp on city government.

"She clearly has a mandate to govern," Mfume said. "Having won, she also has the goodwill and the luxury to take the high road ... to reunite the city, to speak to the larger issues."

Rawlings-Blake ascended from the City Council presidency in February 2010 after Mayor Sheila Dixon was convicted of embezzlement and resigned the mayor's office. Almost immediately Rawlings-Blake faced a series of challenges — from unprecedented blizzards and Hurricane Irene to pension and budget shortfalls.

Moving from one crisis to the next, she has been seen by many as more competent than visionary, more methodical than inspiring. But now, Mfume and others said, she can begin taking charge of the city's long-term direction.

"People were hungry for an immediate vision," Mfume said of her sudden entry into office following Dixon's resignation. "The first vision is you have to get behind the wheel and drive it. After you park it, then you can stand up and say what your vision is."

Gov. Martin O'Malley, a close political ally of Rawlings-Blake since their days as young Baltimore City Council members, said the election provides her with an opportunity "to speak with greater clarity" about the future.

"It's a subtle difference. It's not quite your term yet until the election," O'Malley said of the transition

Rawlings-Blake will make from finishing someone else's term to beginning her own. "Elections matter. Elections are important."

O'Malley, a Democrat, voted Tuesday in his northeast Baltimore district — he maintains his residency in the city even though he lives in the governor's mansion in Annapolis — and lunched with Rawlings-Blake. He said getting past the primary hurdle will give her breathing room. November's general election is expected to be decided by a largely Democratic electorate.

"It will be somewhat liberating and freeing for her, being able to look ahead and to speak about what's over the horizon rather than right immediately in front of her," O'Malley said.

But Baltimoreans may not necessarily see a vastly different Rawlings-Blake, who has come to be known for her low, even voice and grave demeanor even during campaign events. And, some say, as an incumbent in everything but name, Rawlings-Blake was smart to run a campaign largely above the fray from her perch on City Hall cobblestones.

"She has proceeded very cautiously in her administration and her campaign," said Larry Gibson, a political consultant and professor at the University of Maryland Law School. He made a point to add that she has been "sensibly cautious."

Winning, however, may produce bolder action, Gibson said. He noted that Rawlings-Blake already proved capable of taking a risk, bringing the massive Grand Prix auto race to Baltimore in the face of primary opponents and critics who questioned whether its costs would outweigh benefits.

"Once a person has in front of them a full term, the absolute freedom and the luxury of time often frees them up to take some initiative that might not have been taken otherwise," Gibson said.

Mfume also predicts that Rawlings-Blake may publicly show a warmer side than before.

"Sometimes you're born with it, sometimes you become that way over time," said Mfume, who was a close friend of the mayor's late father, the legendary state legislator Howard "Pete" Rawlings. "When you're the mayor, people want to know you. They like it when they see you on the street, and you smile at them. It humanizes you."

Donald Fry, president of the Greater Baltimore Committee, an influential group of business and civic leaders, said a new term would provide Rawlings-Blake with the opportunity to shape city departments to her liking and to rally residents and businesses to work with her on longer-term goals, such as growing the tax base and improving schools and safety.

"People know she is now there for that full four years," Fry said. "She's had the unique opportunity to see how various departments operate, which ones she'd like

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to see take on a different urgency or different cultural attitudes."

When essentially working as "acting" mayor, "it's tough to attract talent when that talent doesn't know what the duration of her tenure is," Fry said. "People are now going to say, 'I want to go work for her.'"

City Councilman Bill Henry, who has opposed Rawlings-Blake on issues such as her bottle tax, believes she has focused on short-term measures, such as putting more police on the street, knowing she would have to face voters in a relatively short time.

"She's probably been given very conservative advice over the past 1 1/2 years because you want to get your own term," he said. "She was probably advised not to cut police — 'you'll get killed in the election.'"

Henry is among those who hope Rawlings-Blake will shift her attention — he wants the city to create more employment and recreational opportunities for youth.

Hathaway Ferebee, executive director of the Safe & Sound Campaign to improve the lives of young people and families, said she hopes all elected officials work more closely with residents in a joint effort to create a better city. That might be difficult if Tuesday's low turnout at the polls is any indication of civic engagement.

"If people aren't engaged, all an elected official can do is troubleshoot what's in front of their faces," Ferebee said. "It takes both residents and elected officials to be on an optimistic approach to the city."

Still, Ferebee is optimistic about Rawlings-Blake's future.

"I don't know her well enough," Ferebee said. "But I hope the election inspires her to be her most positive, her most energetic self."